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SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL CONCERT REVIEW

Food and Music: The American Modern Ensemble, Robert Paterson (conductor), Tenri Cultural Institute, New York. 17.5.2008 (BH)

Barbara Kolb: *Three Place Settings* (1968)

Marc Mellits: *Fruity Pebbles* (1997)

Robert Paterson: *Eating Variations* (2006, world premiere)

Derrick Wang: *Hors d'oeuvres* (2005-2007)

Leonard Bernstein: *La Bonne Cuisine: Four Recipes for Voice and Piano* (1947)

Yotam Haber: *The Gourmand's Lament* (2003)

William Bolcom: *Lime Jello Marshmallow Cottage Cheese Surprise* (1980)

Aaron Jay Kernis: *The Four Seasons of Futurist Cuisine* (1991)

In recent years a Thanksgiving dinner oddity called the "turducken" has appeared on the U.S. culinary scene: a chicken is stuffed inside a duck, which is then pushed inside a turkey, and the three-layer project is then roasted as usual (or deep-fried in a large oil drum). I never would have expected to find the item glorified in song, but that was before encountering Barbara Kolb's "Roast Peacock," the second of her *Three Place Settings*, which kicked off this giddy concert by the American Modern Ensemble at Tenri Cultural Institute.

The text, presumably from a recipe, is credited to "Cora, Rose and Bob Brown," who extend the turducken concept even further with a peacock encasing a turkey, with ten smaller birds inside and as the core, a single oyster. Kolb's first and third songs in the set are "I Think I'll Have...On a Plate" (about mashed potatoes) and "Automort" (i.e., referencing the automat, a type of food vending machine), and all three use a light hand, with a small instrumental ensemble bubbling under the soloist. Paul Sperry sang Kolb's highly entertaining set with dry gusto and superb comic timing, qualities that infused this entire evening.

Marc Mellits's *Fruity Pebbles*, for violin, cello and piano (Robin Zeh, Robert Burkhart and Blair McMillen), begins with the brightly colored minimalism of "Wood," later finding a way for the 1960s to meet Bartók (in "Shagadellic"), and ends with "Lefty's Elegy," as gentle as "Silent Night" but rather less peaceful, all continuing the evening's sly theme. For Robert Paterson's *Eating Variations*, Ron Singer's five texts cover such meritorious subjects as potential cannibalism at McDonald's ("The Hog"), regurgitation ("Even the Dyspeptic Must Eat"), and the conundrums of why we bother to eat in the first place ("The Dietary Moralists"). Baritone Robert Gardner, crooning like a deadpan philosopher, made the most of Paterson's clever settings.

After intermission came *Hors d'oeuvres* for clarinet and piano by the young composer Derrick Wang, winner of AME's annual composition competition. In three sections—"Crispy," "Creamy" and "Crunchy"—the platter includes mad clarinet runs, a bluesy, almost Gershwin-esque middle, and a hyper-speed chase to end it all. In clarinetist Meighan Stoops and pianist Blair McMillen, Wang couldn't have asked for more ferociously talented interpreters.

Mr. McMillen returned with soprano Jacquelyn Familant, for a well-conceived set including Bernstein's *La Bonne Cuisine: Four Recipes for Voice and Piano*, and William Bolcom's riotous send-up of regrettable salads, *Lime Jello Marshmallow Cottage Cheese Surprise*, the latter taking particular advantage of Familant's persona and vocal pyrotechnics. (And the actual recipe, presumably followed faithfully by Ms. Familant, made an appearance at the post-concert reception.) But perhaps most unusual was Yotam Haber's *The Gourmand's Lament*, an encyclopedic dash through dozens of popular foods, then repeated at virtually twice its original speed.

To end the menu, Aaron Jay Kernis was on hand for *The Four Seasons of Futurist Cuisine*, with brilliant texts culled from F. T. Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* (1909) and *The Futurist Cookbook* (1932). Originally written as a birthday present for a friend, Kernis's opus succeeds happily on its own as wacky yet carefully incised music theater. Mr. Gardner brought more sonorous frivolity coupled with just the right mock-ominous touch—perfect for these odd bits of surreality.

Rounding out the crew of expert AME musicians were Sato Moughalian (flute), Victoria Paterson (violin), Sean McClowry (double bass) and Matt Ward (percussion), with Mr. Paterson conducting with aplomb when needed. Chuckling and walking down West 13th Street, I couldn't recall a classical evening overflowing with so much outright humor. Contemporary music in particular, sometimes accused of being cheerless and didactic, could use a lot more of it, and in this regard AME concocted the funniest concert of the season.

Bruce Hodges

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